

TOP STORY

EDITOR'S PICK

Corn enjoyed highly successful career with Panthers

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Jul 26, 2024



PINCKNEYVILLE — It’s hard to believe, but longtime Pinckneyville High School boys basketball coach Dick Corn has been out of coaching for 17-plus years now.

And what a Hall of Fame career he left behind.

In 32 seasons (1975-76 through 2006-2007) or roaming the sidelines, Corn led the Panthers to 708 wins against only 259 losses. The wins total ranks him 21st all-time in Illinois history.

The only active coach with more wins is Joe Hosman of Massac County High School (849, who is No. 4).

PLAYING DAYSA Benton native, Corn played for legendary Rangers basketball coach Rich Herrin, graduating BCHS in 1968.

“I didn’t get to start until my senior year,” Corn said. “Coach Herrin started five seniors during my junior year. And they were very good. I was second off the bench behind Danny Johnson.”

Benton went 30-1 that year (1966-67 school year) before losing to Carbondale in the super-sectional game.

The Rangers were even better the year before — Corn’s sophomore year — finishing 31-1 and advancing to the Elite 8.

“In my senior year, we were pretty good, just not as good as those two teams,” Corn said. “We went 23-8. We tied for the South Seven Conference championship and beat Du Quoin in the regional championship, but then lost to Mount Vernon in the first game of the sectional tournament.”

Corn said the win over Du Quoin was especially gratifying because the Indians, led by Don Stanhouse and Alan Crews, had popped the Rangers during the regular season.

“We just annihilated them in the regional championship,” Corn recalled. “It was never a game. Doug Collins was a junior and came off the bench and just lit it up.”

Corn described himself as a decent player, but not on par with some of the greats from that era.

“We had several guys who went on to play D-1 basketball from those teams,” Corn said. “In addition to Rich Yunkus (Georgia Tech), there was Jim Adkins who went to Alabama; Jerry Hoover, who went to Florida; Danny Johnson who went to

Western Kentucky; and Greg Fustin, who went to Rice. We had quite a run of talent.”

Corn said Coach Herrin was ahead of his time as a head coach.

“There were no weight rooms back then, but coach was a believer in off-season work. That included weight training, so he used a sled to build up our leg strength and he got some big (industrial-sized) cans of food from the cafeteria and attached an arm bar so that we could do curls for our biceps. And of course, there was always an open gym.”

Corn moved on to Monmouth College (just north of Macomb) after graduating high school. There, he played three years of basketball and was team captain his senior year.

“We were just a middle-of-the-road type of team at Monmouth,” Corn said. “We were never highly successful.”

Corn graduated college in 1972 with a degree in education.

“I actually started out thinking I was going to be a math teacher, but a roommate was a physical education major and I could see that he was enjoying that much more than I was enjoying math. I figured why try to fool myself? Sports is what I liked. Why try something else? That’s why I switched to physical education.”

COACHING DAYS

Corn started out at his alma mater, teaching P.E. and health for one year at Benton Junior High.

“And I coached three sports, which back then only paid \$400 per sport,” he said.

With a little help from Coach Herrin, Corn landed a job at Olney High School with Tigers head coach Ron Herrin, Rich’s brother.

“I was there for two years,” Corn said. “I coached freshman football, freshman basketball, and tennis, which I knew zero about. But it was a very talented team who knew exactly what to do. They just told me to drive the bus and they would take it from there,” Corn said, laughing.

In July of 1975, Corn got his big chance. There was a position for head coach that opened at Pinckneyville. He interviewed and got the job. It turned out to be perhaps the best hire that school ever made in athletics.

“I assisted Gary Glenzy in football and he assisted me in basketball. That’s the way they did it here,” Corn said. “And Gary did a fine job. He was also the head track coach.”

In his first year with the Panthers, the team went 20-8 on the heels of an 8-16 run the year before under Bill Anderson.

“I think I was too naive to be nervous back then,” Corn said. “I have always believed that timing plays a huge role in what happens to you in life.

“Coach Anderson left to go to Rantoul and that opened things up for me,” Corn said. “He was a real tough coach with a very good reputation. My personal approach as a basketball coach was different. It wasn’t quite that tough,” he said.

“I’d like to think the kids kind of gravitated toward my style of coaching.”

The Panthers slipped to 16-12 in Corn’s second season and to 14-15 in his third season.

“That fourth year was pivotal for me,” he said. “I knew we had to win, and fortunately, we went on to go 20-8 that fourth season (1978-79) and also won the regional championship for a fourth-straight time.

“I think we surprised everybody in town that year. After that, I was a lot more comfortable with my job and we didn’t have another losing season for the next 20-plus years.”

The 1980-81 team finished 29-4 and captured regional and sectional titles.

“We won the Eldorado Holiday Tournament that year, beating Cairo in double overtime,” Corn said. “Cairo then came back and embarrassed us in the super-sectional at SIU. They had a heck of a team that year with Lorenzo Duncan and Anthony Webster, so we had nothing to be ashamed of.”

All in all, Corn's Panthers won 24 regional titles in his 32 years on the job. Pinckneyville also won seven sectional titles and made four state finals appearances under his tutelage.

Under Corn, the Panthers claimed two state championships in 1994 (33-2) and 2001 (31-4) while also finishing second in 1988 (32-3) and fourth in 2006.

"That '06 team went 32-3 and simply had the best chemistry," Corn said. "There were no standout players, but everyone just clicked together well. We didn't beat ourselves."

The Panthers won 30-plus games four times under Corn.

"Dick had quite a system going on at Pinckneyville," said former Carlyle and Nashville coach Brad Weathers, one of Corn's good friends. "His teams were always strong defensively and they did a good job transitioning into their offense. Everything just flowed so well with his teams.

"He was so well-prepared for whatever your team did well or didn't do well," Weathers said. "And he enjoyed great success. He won two state championships and a bunch of regionals and conference titles."

Weathers, who is also from Benton, said he was a freshman when Corn was a senior with the Rangers.

"Dick's been a great role model for his players and many younger coaches. I know I always looked up to him and always considered him a mentor."

Former Du Quoin basketball coach Wendell Wheeler and his Indians squads had to match up with the Panthers twice a year. The Perry County rivalry was a good one, but not an antagonistic one.

"Not at all," Wheeler said. "Dick's demeanor never changed, whether they were beating us, or when we managed to beat them. He was always very approachable and helpful, just a classy guy."

Wheeler, whose older brother, Tom, coached for years at Christopher, said he learned so much from watching Corn's Panthers play the game.

“I can’t even begin to tell you how much I learned — a lot,” he said. “I learned when we scouted them and I learned when we played them. Most important, what I remember about Coach Corn is how nice he was to me and to my son, Connor, when he played. Believe me, anytime we beat Pinckneyville, I knew how big of an accomplishment that was.

“He made me work harder as a coach. That’s why he was such a great basketball coach. He set the bar so high that we knew that in order to beat the Panthers, we had to work so much harder than we had.”

Massac’s Hosman is also a fan of Corn’s coaching.

“Dick is one of the top coaches we’ve ever had here in Southern Illinois,” he said. “He made Pinckneyville into one of the best programs in the entire state. And just a classy gentleman.

“If I ever needed help, Dick was always willing to help,” Hosman said. “He influenced so many lives through his coaching (and teaching). His teams played such tenacious defense. And they always had winning seasons. He was kind of a mentor to me. He’s at the top of the list of coaches for me.”

Corn said he never considered leaving Pinckneyville to coach elsewhere.

“I’m not sure I could have been happy anywhere else,” he said. “I do miss the association I had with the kids and my fellow coaches. I enjoyed teaching and motivating.”

Corn said there were myriad high school basketball coaches he respected, but one that stood out to him was not from Southern Illinois.

“Jerry Peters with Memphis University High,” Corn said. “His teams played for a while at the Carbondale Holiday Tournament. I had the utmost respect for him.

“The way he and his kids conducted themselves impressed me,” Corn said. “He never got off the bench. His kids knew exactly what he wanted. He and I developed a nice relationship because of the tournament. We would call one another occasionally to talk basketball or whatever.”

Today, Corn stays busy. At 74, he serves the Pinckneyville School District as a bus driver.

“It gets me out of bed in the morning,” he said. “It’s something to do. I have also done some substitute teaching. Tony Wilson (former high school principal) talked me into that. As it turns out, I kind of enjoyed it. I work anywhere from 2-to-4 days a week.”

Corn said he also helps out with an annual summer basketball camp at a local junior high.

He and his wife, Penny, have two daughters — Melanie and Melissa. Corn also has three stepsons — Lane, Mason, and Collin Woodside — and nine grandchildren.

Describing his coaching success as “humbling,” Corn said some nights he felt good about the work that he did with his team and other nights not so much.

“Most of any success I enjoyed as a coach can pretty much be traced back to Coach Herrin,” Corn said. “He’s the reason I decided to get into coaching. He’s the one I learned the game from and he’s the one who continued to help me anytime I had questions. I hope that I have paid that forward.”